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By Maria Scandale

Attention all vacationers: The Causeway bridge lanes will not be closed for repairs during the summer. A lot of local business owners are afraid that everyone hasn't heard that.

For a tense and angry week, it seemed that it would go the other way, but an outcry from the business community and elected officials convinced the Department of Transportation to delay a resurfacing job until September.

Using economic stimulus funds, the DOT had earlier made sudden plans to start the work on July 20, which would have closed one lane at a time overnight.

Instead, the job will be put off until after the summer season in recognition of those being vital tourism months. Gov. John Corzine said in a press release June 24.

"June, July and August are vital tourism months for the Jersey Shore communities on Long Beach Island" said Corzine, "We respect the concerns of Ocean County residents, officials and business owners and will move construction on the Route 72 Causeway until after the summer season."

"We're certainly happy that the DOT acquiesced on this decision," said Rick Reynolds, Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce executive director. "Rumors of the bridge work would have been enough to put a damper on all of the activities we have during the summer."

It really does make a difference that the bridge will be fully open, local business owners say, especially in this economy and in a year when June has amounted to one disappointing rain delay. Summer is in full swing now, but business owners don't want people to think that even one bridge lane will be closed when it will not.

The DOT removed signs last week that had stated their earlier plan to start in July.

"People don't know; everybody's still talking that it is" (going to be repaired in July,) said Michele Faria, owner of Farias Surf and Sport stores on the Island. "We need to get the word out that the bridge is not going to be worked on this summer."

Long Beach Island is "two and a half hours from every major city," Farias noted, but when her customers had seen the earlier signs, or heard rumors about the plans, "a lot of people said, 'Forget it; we'll stay home.' People don't like that traffic."

But that won't happen, because the business community and mayors were so incensed when they saw the DOT signs that had gone up without their knowledge.

They called and emailed their elected officials, who shot off letters to other authorities, and last Wednesday the official reversal came from DOT - all of that after the \$4.1 million contract had been awarded. It was cancelled.

Work on the Causeway main bridge, officially named the Dorland J. Henderson Memorial Bridge after its design engineer, is to include filling potholes, repairing curbs and applying a protective layer to prevent deterioration.

Reynolds thanked several officials who conveyed the Chamber's initial outrage at the planned July repair work. "Bobbie Steele, of the county public information office, contacted Freeholders Joe Vicari and John Barlett, (and) they contacted the governor's office and the DOT office. Same with Senator (Christopher J.) Connors and his legislative team being in contact with the mayors. And thanks to Congressman John Adler for stepping in also. He talked to the governor's office and the DOT commissioner's office.

"I think they got barraged by all of us at the same moment, by all the constituents down here," said Reynolds.

"It's great news that repairs to Route 72 will now start after Labor Day," said Adler, who secured the funds for the repairs and urged NJDOT to start work after Labor Day. "We cannot lose business during the summer season due to bridge construction. I am pleased that the department has recognized our concerns and is moving forward with a revised plan."

Citing victory in the decision by the DOT to delay any lane closings until after Labor Day, Senator Connors, Assemblyman Brian E. Rumpf and Assemblyman Daniel M. Van Pelt (R-9th) restated their disappointment that the state "even considered this ill-conceived approach" in connection with repair work on the bridge. The legislators said the controversy highlights the "very pressing need to expedite the design phase in order to get the route Route 72 Causeway bridge replacement underway as soon as possible."

"While we are pleased that the DOT has delayed the planned lane closures on the Route 72 bridge until after Labor Day, thus acknowledging the repair work schedule was ill-conceived, the fact of the matter is that it should never have come to this in the first place," wrote Connors, Rumpf and Van Pelt.

"Our Delegation only learned about the planned repair work after we were contacted by dozens of irate business owners on Long Beach Island who were up in arms that the repairs were going to begin at the height of the summer season, and would therefore have a negative impact on our local economy.

"This demonstrates poor communication on the part of the state. Signs were posted without conferring with anyone, even local officials despite the fact that the bridge is the only means of ingress and egress from the Island," The 9th District legislators wrote.

"Local businesses are already struggling to survive the economic hardships created by

recession. Then, while trying to prepare for the summer tourist season, businesses were forced to fight with the state bureaucracy in order to prevent the negative economic impact that would have likely resulted from this poorly conceived policy decision.

"If it were not for the groundswell of opposition from local business owners and public officials representing the Island, it is very unlikely that DOT would have continued with its initial work schedule to the detriment of businesses and vacationers who would have been stuck in traffic."

Connors, Rumpf and Van Pelt said there is a pressing need to get the long-term bridge replacement project underway sooner than three years from now, when the design phase has been scheduled to start. Current plans call for multiphase bridge replacement construction to begin in 2014.

"Our Delegation will continue to push the Administration on making the replacement of the Route 72 bridge an immediate priority within its capital infrastructure plan. We will continue to work with residents and local officials to get the state to start taking the issue more seriously and we do convey that further delay of this project is totally unacceptable."

Ocean County freeholders agreed with the state legislators on several counts. "We join with local Mom and Pop businesses in commemorating the decision to do the work after Labor Day," said Freeholder Gerry Little of Surf City, "July and August are the height of our tourism season and there was a very real fear that this construction could have kept people away from the Island."

Freeholder Joseph H. Vicari, the county's tourism liaison, said seasoned businesses have already taken hits from the poor economy and the rainy weather early in the season.

"July and August can make or break a tourism business. This was the absolute wrong time to schedule this work."

Freeholder Director John Bartlett, Jr. also praised the state's decision, but asked the DOT to move ahead with plans to replace the 50-year old span.

"The work that (has been) planned for the summer was simply a Band-Aid on a bigger problem," he said "What our residents and visitors really need is a new bridge from Stafford Township to Long Beach Island."